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# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PAST

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**ABSTRACT:** The past is deeply important to many of us. But our concern about history can seem puzzling, and needs justification. After all, the past cannot be changed: we can help the living needy, but the tears we shed for the long dead victims of past tragedies help no one. Attempts to justify our concern about history typically take one of two opposing forms. It is assumed either that such concern must be justified in instrumental or otherwise self- and present-centered terms, or that our interest in history must be utterly disinterested, and pursued for its own sake. But neither approach can fully explain, or justify, our concern about the past. I propose a third approach, on which the past matters because it contains much that is of value—all those past people, and the things they did, or had endured—and this value calls for our fitting response. In short: the significance of the past is past significance.

That the past is important to us is plain enough. Think, for example, of the role of history in education—we expect even very young children to know something about the distant past—or of the way life stops to make way for the solemn ceremonies of memorial days.

Or think of the pervasive presence of history in our culture—ranging from the large-scale scholarly projects of academic disciplines such as history and archaeology, to the public appetite for museum exhibitions about the past, popular history books, or historically-inspired fiction and film. Or of how people travel great distances, as if on a pilgrimage, to see historical sites firsthand, and of the way many past events still inspire intense emotion, and shape politics and culture.

This is all familiar. But seen from a distance, these backward-looking practices can seem puzzling. Why should we care about the fate of people who are long dead? Why expect children, or for that matter adults, to know about distant treaties and campaigns? Why wait in line just to observe shattered artifacts that will never be used, or spend years deciphering an ancient script that no one will again write in? And this concern with the past is not just puzzling, but also faces a challenge. After all, it comes at a cost. The budget of a museum could have funded a hospital. A historian could have been a surgeon. History classes could have been replaced with engineering lessons, and the time we spend commemorating the casualties of past tragedies could have been devoted to the many living victims of present atrocities.

Such reflections can lead to skepticism about all this fuss about the past. Henry Ford famously declared that “history is more or less bunk... we want to live in the present and the only history that is worth a tinker’s dam is the history we make today” (see also Rieff, 2016). Plenty of others see history as a waste of time, or a mere pastime. Perhaps we should care less about the past, and more about the present and future. After all, we cannot change the past, and the tears we shed for the dead help no one. But the future is open. We can shape it through our acts. We can help those in need, or act to prevent future catastrophe. So why pay all that attention to the distant deceased at the expense of the living?

As we shall see below, many historians and philosophers answer this challenge in broadly utilitarian terms, by enumerating the different ways in which the study of history is useful to individuals and society. But while there is obviously some benefit to the study of some aspects of the past, this is a mistake. I’ll argue that our concern for the past can be

neither fully explained nor adequately justified in purely instrumental terms, or by other ways of relating the past to us and our present concerns.

It's often assumed that if we reject such instrumentalism then we must conclude that the study of history requires no external justification, that knowledge of the past is worth seeking for its own sake. This is usually combined with the claim that we must insulate historical inquiry from our value judgments. But although the value of historical knowledge isn't dependent on its utility, I'll argue that this approach also leaves out something important.

I will sketch a different account of our concern for the past. This 'Valuist' account can be captured in a slogan: *the significance of the past is past significance*. We care about events in the past because these events involve value. People matter, and the past contains very many people. And many things that matter have happened to, or were done by, these people: the evil of suffering and injustice, the good of peace and prosperity and achievement, etc. We *should* care about history because many events in the past contain, or otherwise affect, value in these and other ways. This seems to me so obviously correct, that I would be surprised if no one had said something like this before. But I wasn't able to find any clear example of a prior statement of such a view. My aim here is therefore to put forward, and defend, this Valuist alternative.

## Questions About the Past

Let me start by distinguishing the question I shall be concerned with here from other questions about the past. The Greek term ἱστορία, *historia*, is usually translated as meaning 'inquiry' or 'knowledge acquired by investigation'. So it is already ambiguous between *knowledge* about the past and the kind of *inquiry* that seeks to obtain it, an inquiry now led by the discipline of history. We can also distinguish between such *knowledge*—something that we can now lack or possess—and the *objects* of that knowledge—past events stretching back many thousands of years into the past, and the numerous long deceased people who participated in these events, acting or being acted upon. These people and events are contained in the *past*, a stretch of time that ultimately extends all the way to the Big Bang.

So there is (1) the past itself, (2) the events it contains, (3) our knowledge of these events, and (4) the inquiry that produces such knowledge. We can ask questions about each of these, as well as about their relation. For example, we can ask how we can know about the past, or whether historical events can be explained and how. I shan't be concerned here with these familiar questions in the philosophy of history. I will be interested in how the past matters, a broadly ethical question. By this I don't mean the question of whether it matters that there *is* some past behind us. I will be concerned with another question: *given* that the past is what it is—not an empty stretch of time, but a tangled human history—should these historical events matter to us and in what way?

This is a question about the significance for us now of past events themselves. I will not be directly concerned with the significance of the present remnants of past events—with questions about, for example, the value of burial grounds or archeological finds; but an account of the significance of the past will obviously also bear on these further questions (for important recent work addressing questions about the value of historical artefacts, see Matthes, 2013 and 2015; James, 2013; Young, 2013; Korsmeyer, 2016, 2018; and Bicknell et al., 2019).

On the account I will propose, it is the significance inherent in these past events, in the things past people did or experienced, that explains why we care, and *ought* to care, about the past. Past value explains the value of historical knowledge and inquiry. By contrast, the competing accounts I will first consider try to explain for our concern for the past, or

specifically the value of historical knowledge and inquiry, in a more direct fashion, whether by focusing on their benefits or by ascribing to them intrinsic value.

Before I turn to these competing accounts, let me clarify three things about what I will be trying to do. First, our concern about the past raises both justificatory and explanatory questions. My primary aim will be normative: to justify our concern about the past. While I believe that this justification also help explain why we in fact care about the past, this is a further, broadly empirical question that I will not be able to fully address here. Second, I will be largely concerned with our *collective* reasons for caring about the past. I will only later consider whether and how these reasons apply to us as individuals. Finally, throughout this paper I will speak about reasons to know about the past as shorthand for reasons for a wider range of cognitive states and activities: finding out about past events, and then maintaining and disseminating that knowledge, as well as, when knowledge is impossible, the best supported beliefs, etc.

## Instrumentalist Accounts

Historians don't need to be persuaded that the past matters. But the question of why it matters tends to receive only passing mention in their voluminous writings. When historians do consider this question, they offer a wide range of answers (see e.g. Stearns, 1998). These answers usually appeal to the alleged instrumental value of historical knowledge, to how it might bear on us and on what matters to us now. Since such answers typically mention only instrumental considerations and are clearly meant to capture our core reasons for caring about history, they are best interpreted as assuming

**Historical Instrumentalism.** The main (or only) reasons we have to know and care about the past are the benefits to us (and perhaps to future generations) of such knowledge and concern.

Utilitarianism and most consequentialist views are obviously committed to a strong version of this claim. But this is a widely held view.

Historical inquiry has been claimed to be useful in multiple ways. Most common is the idea that understanding the past is the key to understanding the present and predicting the future. Thucydides already suggested that exact knowledge of the past is useful as “an aid to the interpretation of the future” (Thucydides, 2000) and Hobbes wrote that “the principal and proper work of history being to instruct and enable men, by the knowledge of actions past, to bear themselves prudently in the present and providently towards the future...” (Molesworth, 1839). Macaulay (1828) went so far as to write that “no past event has any intrinsic importance. The knowledge of it is valuable only as it leads us to form just calculations with respect to the future.”

This remains a dominant view. E. H. Carr writes that “[t]he function of the historian is neither to love the past nor to emancipate himself from the past, but to master and understand it as the key to the understanding of the present” (Carr, 1961). Hayden White even more bluntly asserts that “[t]he contemporary historian has to establish the value of the study of the past, not as an end in itself, but as a way of providing perspectives on the present that contribute to the solution of problems peculiar to our own time” (White, 1978). White equates the value of history with its usefulness for life or, as he puts it, its ability to answer the practical question “what is to be done.” White is here deliberately echoing Nietzsche who wrote that “we wish to use history only insofar as it serves the living” (Nietzsche, 1997).

A more elevated variant of this view regards history as a source, not of practical lessons but of moral ones—both by offering us moral exemplars to follow and by alerting us to the dangers of evil (Stearns, 1998). Defending the moral evaluation of historical acts, Waldron (1992) similarly suggests that “... our moral understanding of the past is often a way of

bringing to imaginative life the full implications of principles to which we are already in theory committed.” History provides, he writes, “a lesson about what it is like for people just like us—human, all too human—to face real moral danger.” Waldron further argues that history can “sustain the moral and cultural reality of self and community.” While this claim needn’t be understood in purely instrumental terms—see below—this is how it’s often understood, as in the common idea that history promotes patriotism and instills a sense of national identity.

I could continue the list of history’s supposed benefits. But there is no need to closely consider each instrumentalist account since such accounts all fail for similar reasons.

Consider, as an example, the common claim that the study of history is the key to understanding the present, or a source of lessons. It’s obvious that what we do is continuously informed by our knowledge of the past. It’s hard to show that such knowledge is employed in ways that regularly lead to better outcomes but it’s wildly implausible that total ignorance of the past would improve decision-making. And when our knowledge of the past doesn’t improve our decisions it at least improves our ability to understand what is happening around us.

Still, most of the knowledge of the past that is potentially useful in this way is fairly specific and recent. A contemporary president has plenty to learn from the Cuban missile crisis. But it would be far-fetched, to put it mildly, to hold that current policy can be usefully informed by a study of the function of Stonehenge, Mayan chronology or the life of Ramses II. Current social science is a far greater resource for plotting policy, and for understanding the present, than most historical work.

In any event, even when the study of certain historical events can plausibly be held to teach important lessons it’s still false that these lessons are our main reasons for studying these events. Knowing about the atrocities of the past can no doubt do some good, and may help reduce the likelihood of future atrocities. But it would be preposterous to suggest that our only, or even main, reason to know about the Holocaust or slavery is that they teach us such lessons. As if, had we concluded that no such lessons would ever be learnt—or even that they will teach the wrong lessons—then it would be just fine to forget about these horrors.

Parallel points apply to other instrumentalist accounts of the value of history. Such accounts at best justify a contingent concern with a narrow range of historical events. Even here, they put history in a subsidiary role to other sources of knowledge that can achieve that instrumental goal more directly and effectively. Finally, and most importantly, we would still have reasons to be concerned about the past if these instrumental considerations were absent or even reversed.

To see this, consider the following scenario:

**The Blank Slate.** Imagine the surprise arrival of emissaries from an advanced extra-terrestrial civilization. These aliens are benevolent and wish to offer us technology and scientific knowledge that would solve our many pressing problems. But they set a condition. They think our obsession with the past is itself part of the problem and they require that we start our beneficial relationship with them with a blank slate. We should turn our back on the past as fast as we can: close down history departments and museums, shrink education about the past to the bare minimum, and deliver our history books, archives and artifacts to the landfill. The benefits to us of doing so would be immense.

This proposal is different from the Orwellian rewriting of the past associated with totalitarian regimes. Such rewriting involves mendacity and manipulation. Its aim is to control the masses and undermine their sense of reality. But no mendacity is involved here, and I assume the aliens are genuinely benevolent, and may even be right that it would be better *for us* to give up the past.

The aliens' bargain would remove our instrumental grounds for holding on to our concern about the past. The various instrumental benefits associated with such a concern would be either rendered irrelevant, or obtained in a superior manner in another way, or otherwise outweighed by vastly greater benefits of other kinds. For example, we wouldn't need the lessons of history in the future offered to us—either because that future would be so different or because the aliens would offer us better advice as to how to manage our affairs.

Should we accept the offer? This may be tempting to some but I at least find the idea appalling. Accepting the offer would be a profound mistake—those who order the shutting down of museums or the destruction of precious artifacts and archives should feel deep shame. If you agree, then you must reject Instrumentalism.

## Non-Instrumentalist Self-Centered Accounts

Collingwood (1946) held that history matters because it provides us with “human self-knowledge”. This is because “knowing yourself means knowing what you can do; and since nobody knows what he can do until he tries, the only clue to what man can do is what man has done. The value of history,” therefore, “is that it teaches us what man has done and thus what man is.”

This can still be understood in instrumental terms: we can find out about ourselves by learning about past others. Understood in this way, this account is vulnerable to the same objections that undermine other instrumentalist accounts. There are better ways to find out about ourselves, and what we can do, than by studying Neolithic carvings.

But the relation between historical knowledge and self-knowledge needn't be instrumental. Perhaps knowing our origins, including our historical origins, is itself a form of self-knowledge. Moreover, returning to the idea of understanding the present via knowing the past, that too needn't be instrumental. Knowing what happened in the recent past may be constitutive of understanding many present events. Waldron's remarks about the relation between history and identity can also be understood along similar lines. If our history is constitutive of our collective or individual identities, then knowledge of that history may be required to sustain our identity.

On such accounts,

**Self-Centered Historical Non-Instrumentalism.** Our main reason for knowing and caring about history is because the past bears some important relation to us, and *we* matter (to ourselves).

So our core reasons for looking backwards are located in some non-instrumental value, but that value resides *here*, in *us*. It's natural to understand that value as prudential, but it could also be claimed to be moral.

Such accounts make no claims about the consequences of historical knowledge and concern. They can therefore offer reasons for rejecting the extra-terrestrials' offer in *Blank Slate*. The extra-terrestrials would be asking us to give up knowledge that is constitutive of our identity, and that is needed if our projects and commitments are to make sense. What good would the ultra-advanced technology be for us if to enjoy them we must give up what makes us us?

In assessing the Self-Centered account, it's important not to conflate it with

**Historical Partiality.** We have special reasons to know and care about those past people and aspects of history to which we bear some special relation.

This is a claim about agent-relative reasons to care about aspects of the past.<sup>1</sup> Self-Centrists assume not only that we have such partial reasons, but also that they are our main reasons for caring about the past. Importantly, however, Self-Centrists also make a further claim about *why* we have such partial reasons—it bases these reasons in present value, in value to us.

Self-Centrism may seem attractive because Historical Partiality seems plausible. Some past events are more important for us to know about because we relate to them in some distinctive way, most commonly, because they involve past people to whom we bear a special relation, because they are our ancestors or predecessors. A Jew, or a German, may have special reasons to know, and care about, the Holocaust that others don't have.

However, they *also* have reasons to know about chattel slavery, or about the 1942 Bengal famine, or about numerous other past horrors and glories that in no way bear on them, their origins or identity, or their projects. And if we have such weighty impartial reasons for caring about some past events, then Historical Partiality doesn't capture key reasons we have for caring about the past. And that is enough to show that Self-Centrism is false.

It could be replied, echoing Collingwood, that we do have something in common with all past people. We are all human. Writing of the 'common patrimony of humanity', Young (2013) similarly proposes that "humans and human achievements have value—cosmopolitan value—to everybody precisely because they are human achievements," while Matthes (2015) suggests that "simply being human provides one with a reason to value the prehistoric places and artifacts that shed light on, or are associated with, our development as a species." But besides emptying the idea of a special relation to aspects of the past of its content, this suggestion still fails to capture that source of our reasons for caring about the past. Past horrors would merit our attention even if their victims weren't human. We have reasons to know, and even care, about the demise of the Denisovans whether or not humans were involved. More fantastically, imagine that we discover that, millions of years ago, a failed extra-terrestrial expedition attempted to establish a colony on Earth. We would still have reason to assemble the story of that doomed colony.

Moreover, Self-Centrism also fails even as an account of the partial reasons we undoubtedly do have for caring about aspects of the past. There is something disturbing in the idea that, say, African Americans have special reasons for caring about slavery only in so far as this is required for them to understand themselves or sustain their identity. Rather, having a certain identity may give one agent-relative reasons to be especially concerned with what is independently significant. This is how partiality works in more familiar contexts. I should worry about my friend's grave illness not because our friendship is part of my identity, and therefore something I need to maintain for my own sake, but because, as a friend, my friend's agony deserves my special attention. The ultimate source of these partial reasons is my friend's agony, not our friendship, let alone my identity—what our friendship does is link these reasons to me, and it also amplifies them.<sup>2</sup>

## Disinterested History

So we need an account of the value of history that isn't instrumentalist or present-centered. Historians who reject such views often assume that the alternative must be a view of history as disinterested and value-free, aiming solely at historical knowledge for its own sake. Geoffrey Elton, for example, held that the study of history is "autonomous and justified within itself", and it's therefore a "cardinal error to reverse this process and study the past for

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<sup>1</sup> Matthes (2015) discusses the related idea that attachment can endow certain historical objects and places with sentimental value.

<sup>2</sup> For the similar point that 'personal' value depends on prior 'impersonal' value, see Raz (2001).

the light it throws on the present.” (Elton, 1967: 66). This is a view of history that is often associated with the professional historians of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and encapsulated in Leopold von Ranke famous remark that his aim is to “simply show how it really was”.

Elton was one prominent 20<sup>th</sup> century defender of the disinterested view. Another was Michael Oakeshott, who sharply distinguished the ‘historical past’—the concern of the true historian, who is interested in the past for its own sake—from the merely ‘pragmatic past’, which regards history in relation to the present (Oakeshott, 1962). Oakeshott went so far as to assert that history must be “wholly without relevance to practical life” (Oakeshott, 1933: 157), and the true historical masterpiece “releases us from the burden of history as the intellectual and moral preface to the contemporary world” (cited in Dray, 1968: 33).

One critic of this view ridiculed it as ‘own-sakism’ (Jenkins, 1995: 70). But it’s a fitting label and I will use it without any derogatory connotations. Although the Own-Sakist view is often presented as a rejection of all value claims, the claim that we should seek historical knowledge for its own sake is nevertheless best understood in value terms:

**Historical Own-Sakism.** Our main reason for seeking historical knowledge is for its own sake, because such knowledge has intrinsic value; and this value is independent of any further value.

Own-Sakism seems to me superior to instrumentalist and other present-centered accounts. Own-Sakism focuses on the past qua past. It identifies reasons for concern about the past that are independent of contingent utility or our identity—reasons we would have whoever we are.

But Own-Sakism is nevertheless mistaken. First, Own-Sakists assert that historical knowledge is valuable in itself, but usually offer little in defense of this claim. Now that’s fair enough. If historical knowledge is intrinsically valuable, perhaps there is nothing more to say. But the force of this reply depends on there not *being* more to say; and as we shall see, there is.

Second, Own-Sakism can only account for our cognitive interest in the past. It cannot explain the many other ways in which the past matters to us non-instrumentally. We can see this when we consider *Blank Slate*. To be sure, to accept the extra-terrestrials’ offer would be to give up a hard-earned store of valuable knowledge. However, this loss would surely be balanced by the great gains in *other* kinds of valuable knowledge (which also happen to be vastly more useful). And Own-Sakism cannot explain why accepting the extra-terrestrials’ offer would be a *moral* failure.

Finally, the claim that historical knowledge is intrinsically valuable is presumably not the claim that any knowledge about the past has such value, or at least not that all such knowledge is equally valuable—what Heydrich said at the Wannsee Conference and what he had there for breakfast. Own-Sakists will reject as a caricature Nietzsche’s characterization of the ‘antiquarian’ historian as an obsessive hoarder of facts and artifacts who “assigns to the things of the past no difference in value and proportion which would distinguish things from each other fairly” (Nietzsche, 1997). But own-sakists owe us an account of why certain kinds of historical knowledge are more important than others, and if historical inquiry is completely autonomous, they cannot do so by appealing to external considerations.

The old debate between Own-Sakism and Instrumentalist and Self-Centrist views typically assumes that either we purge historical discourse of all valuation, explicit or implicit, or our interest in the past must be entirely pragmatic, and self-centered. Oakeshott, for example, thought that “[t]he categories of “right” and “wrong”, “good” and “bad”, “justice” and “injustice” etc. relate to the organization and understanding of the world in respect of its relationship to ourselves” and therefore “[t]o inquire into the moral value of past conduct is to relapse into a practical attitude toward the past” (Oakeshott, 1962: 144, 164).

Oakeshott therefore held that historians should refrain from making statements such as ‘It would have been better if the French Revolution had never taken place’ or even ‘He died too soon’ because such statements reflect ‘contemporary values’ (Oakeshott, 1962: 163).

But this is a false dichotomy. Our value judgments about the past needn’t express a ‘practical attitude towards the past’, and although our value judgments about the French Revolution reflect our ‘contemporary values’, that is no different than saying that our judgments about Caesar’s reasons for crossing the Rubicon or, for that matter, a past sighting of a comet, reflect our ‘contemporary’ psychology and astronomy.

The important point, though, is that we should distinguish value from evaluation, and evaluation from practical interests. We can then see that a rejection of Instrumentalist or Self-Centered accounts needn’t force us to conceive of history as a value-free and purely cognitive enterprise. Conversely, recognition of the fact that our thinking about the past is pervaded with value needn’t force us to think of it as merely the projection of our shifting practical interests. A third option opens up: our concern for history, and the value of historical knowledge, is grounded in prior value *without* being instrumental or otherwise self-centered. The rest of this paper will sketch such an approach.

Just to be clear, I have no intention to deny that instrumental and self-centered considerations, and even curiosity, can be reasons to look backwards. What I deny is that such reasons—whether considered separately or pooled together—can capture our most fundamental ground for caring about the past.

## Back to the Beginning

Herodotus begins his *Histories* by telling us that he engaged in this inquiry (ιστορία)

“in the hope of thereby preserving from decay the remembrance of what men have done, and of preventing the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and the Barbarians from losing their due meed of glory, and withal to put on record what were their grounds of feud.” (Herodotus, 1997)

And Tacitus later explained that his purpose

“is not to relate at length every motion, but only such as were conspicuous for excellence or notorious for infamy. This I regard as history’s highest function, to let no worthy action be uncommemorated, and to hold out the reprobation of posterity as a terror to evil words and deeds.” (Tacitus, 2004)

These are some of the earliest accounts of the aim of history: history as concerned with the great deeds of the great men of the past. This may seem, well, a touch out of date. But I think Herodotus and Tacitus were closer to the truth than many later and contemporary authors.

Let us first set aside the instrumental element that is admittedly present in these remarks: the aim of explaining the (then present) conflict between the Greeks and the Asians in Herodotus, or that of deterring future evil by the promise of posterity’s reprobation in Tacitus. The main idea, though, is simply that we should preserve the memory of those past actions and events that were “conspicuous for excellence or notorious for infamy”, or otherwise “great and glorious”. And we shouldn’t merely remember those actions, but remember them *as* glorious or notorious—and admire or disapprove of them accordingly.

Commenting on Herodotus’ opening words, Arthur Danto (2003) wonders whether they suggest a non-instrumental account of the value of history. Perhaps, Danto tentatively proposes, we should “shift ground entirely from present to the past itself”, and consider the possibility that we have “some kind of duty to the past itself to find out its truth”,



“Not because it does us any good beyond the fact of doing that good as such, like keeping a promise when the person to whom it was made is dead and no one would know the difference if we broke it? Are we in some sense fulfilling a moral duty to these personages who did the astonishing things Herodotus speaks of by preserving the knowledge that they did them? Not because it is valuable to us to have that knowledge but in some sense valuable to them?”

This suggestion is in the right direction. We should shift from the present to the past itself. But not because we have *duties* to past persons as we might have a duty to keep a promise to someone who died, or because we should shift from a focus on value to us to focus on value *to* the long dead—as if we benefit them by keeping a record of their deeds. Rather, we should shift to focus on the value *of* these past people, and of the remarkable things they did.

What Herodotus and Tacitus are saying is that there are past people and actions that stand out as remarkable, whether positively or negatively, and these people and actions should therefore be remembered. But we can abstract away from this focus on great acts and the glory or infamy they deserve. What we then get is the idea that some things in the past—people, acts, events, artifacts—possessed value, whether good or bad, and some possessed significant value. *We should remember those past things because of their value and in ways that fittingly respond to that value.* Herodotus and Tacitus got this right, even if they developed this idea in terms of an axiology we no longer share.

## The Significance of the Past is Past Significance

According to what I will call *Valuism*, the past matters because it contains a vast amount of things that matter: because it contains suffering and death and injustice and virtue and achievement and all that.

**Historical Valuism.** Our main reasons to know and care about history is the *value* history contains; knowledge and concern are *fitting responses* to that past value.

A large-scale war, for example, contains a vast amount of evil—think, if you need an illustration, of the tens of thousands of Tommies being shredded to pieces by machine gun fire and artillery in the first few hours of the Somme Offensive. Or think of the horrors of chattel slavery—of, for example, the African slaves who were thrown overboard by the crew of the *Zong* in order to claim insurance. That past disvalue calls for a response. It matters that all those people had died so horribly. And it should therefore matter *to us* that they had died. This is why we should know, and care about, the Great War and the transatlantic slave trade.

Events in the past matter because they possess or contain value, as a war does, but they can also matter by causing or making a significant difference to value—think of a declaration of war, as well of the sequence of events, and other factors, that led to such a declaration. Our concern about the past primarily, I believe, reflects our recognition of such past value. The value of historical knowledge, and of the inquiry that seeks it, is largely derived from this prior significance. We have reason to find out about (and to preserve the memory of) significant past events—and to know of them *as* significant—because that is a fitting response to that past significance. Knowledge of such past events is also, of course, a necessary condition for further fitting responses.

Since these backwards-looking reasons aren't self-interested, since they often have a strong impartial character, and since ignoring or violating them often calls for a recognizably moral response, it seems appropriate to describe them as moral reasons. I concede that it's not clear how such reasons can be accommodated by familiar ethical theories. They are, for

example, incompatible with most consequentialist views.<sup>3</sup> But this seems to me a problem for these theories, not for Valuism.

## Making Sense of Our Concern About the Past

Valuism, I believe, offers the best account of our sense that we ought to care about the past. Valuism can explain why it would be wrong to turn our back on the past even when we remove or dramatically outweigh any of the instrumental benefits of backward-looking concern, and even if we were offered considerable cognitive benefits in exchange, such as deeper knowledge of the working of the universe. It can also explain why turning our back on the past would be morally wrong rather than merely a prudential error.

Valuism is also best positioned to explain the non-cognitive aspects of our concern for the past: memorial services held for the fatalities of now distant wars or the monuments and museums dedicated to past atrocities or struggles against injustice, as well as our emotional responses to the past (for discussion of such impartial emotional responses, see Smilansky, 2013; Kahane, 2019). These are all responses to significant instances of past value. But Valuism doesn't merely capture an optional overlay on top of an independent cognitive interest. It also explains the character and focus of that cognitive interest. In particular, it offers a straightforward account of what about the past is worth knowing about—an account that seems to me to largely track what historians, and the rest of us, deem to be historically important: historians focus more on large-scale wars than on isolated outbursts of violence, more on the sources of prolonged periods of prosperity than on, say, changes in grammar or decor. And while more recent historiography has shifted from the traditional focus on diplomacy and conflict to pay more attention to the 'microhistory' of the daily lives of ordinary people (see e.g. Zemon Davis, 1984), this seems to me to reflect the realization that it's in such lives that most value in the past actually resides.

Finally, Valuism is better placed than its competitors to answer the skeptical challenge. Unlike Instrumentalism, it doesn't appeal to self-interest or rely on vague claims about supposed benefits. Unlike Own-Sakism, Valuism doesn't simply assert that historical knowledge is intrinsically valuable—a value the skeptic about history obviously can't see and won't accept. Moreover, since Own-Sakism understands that value in purely cognitive terms, it's hard to see how it could defend our backward-looking practices against competing moral pressures. By contrast, Valuism offers moral reasons to be concerned about the past, and, moreover, reasons that don't appeal to new and contested values. It appeals to the very same values that the skeptic would already accept—i.e. the badness of suffering and injustice, goodness of happiness and achievement, etc. The skeptic may deny that these things still matter when they move to the past. But this is a different challenge, a challenge that, as I will now argue, we can also answer.

## Value and Time

Valuism says that we should care about the past because the past contains value and we should recognize and fittingly respond to that value. Now there is nothing remarkable about the idea that value calls for a fitting response. On some views, for something to have value *just is* for there to be reasons for having certain fitting attitudes towards it (e.g. Scanlon,

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<sup>3</sup> One consequentialist view that is compatible with Valuism is Hurka (2000)'s recursive account, on which it is itself good to love the good and hate the bad—though Hurka himself holds that such attitudes to value in the distant past have only negligible value.

1998); but we don't need to accept such a view to agree that when something possesses value then there *are* such reasons to fittingly respond to it.<sup>4</sup>

Now if we thought that the *only* way to respond to value is to promote it then the very idea of caring about value in the past would make no sense since nothing we can do can change the past. But such a view is implausible. By contrast, if fittingly responding to value primarily involves having certain attitudes towards it (Scanlon, 1998; Scheffler, 2011), then it is obvious that we can, and routinely do, respond to past value: just think of regret, gratitude, grief and similar backwards-looking sentiments. Even when these attitudes are focused on recent past events in our own life, they are still responses to past value. And we often enough have such attitudes to properly historical events, even if they typically focus on the fairly recent past.

A skeptic might object: 'Suppose we do have reasons to care about what has value. But what has value are things in the present. Things in the past are things that *had* value. Present suffering is bad, and matters. Past suffering *was* bad, and no longer matters. We needn't care about the past.'

It's bad when someone experience agony. When that agony is in the past, it's of course true that it isn't bad *now*. But it would be odd to say that, because of that, *this* agony is no longer bad. No: it's a bad thing that is now in the past. It's a bad thing that was, not a thing that was bad. Suffering is bad in virtue of what it feels like. And that doesn't change when it moves to the past. And that past badness (badness in the past) continues to pull its weight in familiar ways. For example, by making a difference to how good or bad a life is overall. In the same way, the badness of suffering experienced in the distant past isn't erased: it continues to make a difference to how good or bad the *world* is, overall. Moreover, the idea that we should forget the past and focus instead on the present and future is self-defeating. Do we really genuinely value something if we also believe that it would be just fine to completely forget all about it as soon as it's gone?

In thinking about these questions, it might help to briefly consider possible views about the metaphysics of time. On eternalist and growing block views of time, the past still exists. Past pain really is there, just in a different temporal location. On such views, it would be hard to see why we wouldn't have reason to care about past value, however temporally distant—just as a catastrophe doesn't stop mattering just because it's many miles away—as if you could erase its significance by driving away.

Presentists do claim that only the present exists. Homo Erectus, the Lisbon earthquake, and Kublai Khan aren't still there, somewhere in the past. They are all gone. Now such a view may support the view that the present is especially important in some sense (Schopenhauer, 2007: 19). But I don't see how presentism could plausibly support the view that nothing in the past matters. If only what exists matters then for presentists nothing in the past *or* future could matter in itself—not even if it's just a moment ago or a moment from now. We would have to give up not only all backward-looking attitudes such as gratitude and grief, but also forward-looking ones such as fear and hope. This seems absurd. And even if I feel relief that a pain is now gone, it still makes my life overall worse, as does the misery I felt as a child, and other misfortunes I had experienced.

Past value in my life continues to matter, so past value can matter. And past value relating to others clearly does matter. We are horrified to read about civilians being gassed.

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<sup>4</sup> While Valuism appeals to the idea of fitting attitudes, or more broadly that of reason for attitudes, it in no way assumes that we must understand value *in terms* of such attitudes. Possible counter-examples to fitting attitude accounts of value therefore don't threaten Valuism—in fact, Valuism as developed here assumes that past value often issues in reasons for certain attitudes only in conjunction with further factors such as temporal distance or shared history (for this line of objection to fitting attitudes accounts, see Bykvist (2009) and the reply by Orsi (2013)).

We *should* be horrified. But even if we are well informed, we will find out about such an evil hours or days after it had happened. And if it makes sense to be horrified about evil that took place hours ago then, at least so far as presentism goes, it should also make sense to be horrified about the the Zyklon B that the SS's 'Hygienic Institute' delivered by ambulance.

Value in the past still matters. This doesn't mean that it matters in the same way as present and future value. We can act to prevent future pain but nothing we can do will erase past pain (nor, for that matter, *present* pain, narrowly conceived). Past pain may also matter less. We certainly care more about the present and the near future than about the distant future, and care more about the future than about the past. We prefer, as Parfit pointed out, a pain in our past to a pain in our future (Parfit, 1981). Valuism is compatible with such a bias. It claims that the past matters, not that it matters as much as the present and future.

We have a further bias. We care more about the recent past than about the more distant past (Hurka, 2000; Orsi, 2013: 692). We engage in backward-looking temporal discounting. It is not easy to justify such discounting. Certainly presentism won't help here since it cannot distinguish between the near and distant past. Discounting in the forward direction is often justified in epistemic terms—typically, the further an outcome is in the future, the less confidence we have that it will actually occur. Such considerations obviously don't apply in the backwards direction. While we often know less about the distant past, this isn't always true. And what we do know about the past we often enough know with something close to certainty. Those impressed by such considerations might want to understand Valuism in temporally neutral terms (Greene & Sullivan, 2015). But, again, Valuism is perfectly compatible with the view that the more distant past matters less.

## Too much to value?

From the objection that the past contains nothing for us to value, we can turn to the objection that it contains *too* much value. After all, history is crammed with a mind-boggling number of individuals, acts, events, and other things that matter. We couldn't possibly care about, or even begin to know, this immensity: all those massacres and intellectual breakthroughs, the joys and ecstasies and, especially, all those people. And we can't have reasons to do what we can't do.

It hardly follows from this, however, that we have no reason at all to respond to the value the past contains, or even that it's entirely at our discretion what in the past to respond to. What we *can* do is break down the totality of past value into its significant parts—to broad patterns or causally-linked clusters of value—and respond to *their* value. We can start with those parts that contain the greatest amount of value, and then, working our way down, move either to smaller parts, or to parts within parts, and so forth. How far down we can go would depend both on the actual distribution of value in the world, and on our own limits. We cannot cover every thing, but we can cover plenty.

That history cannot be, and needn't be, an exhaustive chronicle of everything that has happened in the past is a truism of historiography. We need a criterion of selection. Valuism offers such a criterion: it distinguishes between the valueless and the valuable, and between what has (or affects) more or less value (recall Herodotus singling out of 'great and wonderful acts'). People need to know about the Holocaust; about Mesoamerican butterfly sacrifice, not so much.

It might be objected that the problem isn't that we couldn't possibly know about, and value, every past event of value, but that we *needn't*. Yes, to value something is, roughly, to care about it, but we have no reason whatsoever to value most of the things we judge to have value (Raz, 2001; Scheffler, 2011; Matthes, 2015; Bulgarian history is one of Scheffler's examples of things that he regards as valuable but needn't value). We can recognize the value

of entomology or origami without feeling the slightest normative pull to engage in these activities—and not just because we don’t have the time. Shifting back to the context of the past, to hold that we should each respond to as much past value as we can is to construe the normative pull of the past on us in an implausibly demanding way.

This objection would have considerable force if Valuism claimed that each and every one of us has a reason to robustly care about, and engage with, each and every thing of value in the past, at least to the best of our ability. But Valuism makes a much weaker claim.

First, recall that Valuism is in the first instance only a claim about the reasons that we have together. Some of these reasons apply to us as individuals. While few of us are constantly looking backwards, ignoring what’s around us, we do expect people to have a fairly broad knowledge of significant historical events. History is allocated its space in the curriculum, archives and museums are given their budgets. And we are all expected to pause, on certain days or weeks, to mourn or celebrate aspects of the past—such events are precisely designed to bracket pressing present concerns, allowing us to turn our attention backwards.

But our reasons to respond to past value more often take a collective form. *We* respond to the value in the past when *some* of us fittingly respond to it. That is to say, we also engage in a kind of division of cognitive and evaluative labor. The core division is between a majority largely focused on present concerns and historians and others who are dedicated to backward-looking projects. Then there is the internal division of labor within the discipline of history into the study of different periods and areas, or a focus on diplomacy, economy or culture, etc. In this way, we *collectively* respond to reasons to care about the past in ways that not only greatly transcend our individual ability to do so, but also prevent that mass of past value from making oppressive demands on our individual lives.

Second, Valuism doesn’t claim that we need to *value* past events of value, only that we should *respond* to them in fitting ways. In plenty of (though not all) cases, the fitting response to past events is a much paler thing than the degree of emotional investment that is involved in robust valuing. It will often involve instead pro tanto preferences that, for example, things had gone differently than they did (Kahane, 2019). And at the far end, it may just involve knowing about a past event, so long as one knows it *because* of its value, and *as* involving that value.

It might be objected that knowing, and similar cognitive attitudes, are not pro- or con-attitudes and therefore cannot be fitting attitudes to past value. In reply, consider the following: (i) In order to fittingly respond to past value, we need to know enough about it; to lament past suffering without actually knowing anything about the past isn’t a fitting response to that past suffering. (ii) I didn’t say that merely knowing about value in the past is sufficient. I said we need to know about past value *as* possessing that value, and *because* of that. Now, such value judgments are typically accompanied by fitting pro- or con-attitudes. These can involve a felt affective response, even if a faint one. But, as I just wrote, they can also involve unfelt backward-looking preferences. On some internalist views, there may be a conceptual link between value judgments about the past and such further attitudes. But even if there isn’t such a link, it still seems that, as a matter of human psychology, such attitudes typically do accompany our value judgments, even when they are about the past. (iii) Even if, or when, such judgments about the past are not accompanied by such further attitudes, recognition of that past value can still be expressed by acceptance of norms about what attitudes should *not* accompany such judgments. Giggling at a memorial service is a fault, as is remembering a past catastrophe only as the punchline to a crude joke. (iv) The cognitive

states may themselves serve as fitting responses to past value.<sup>5</sup> The premature death of a close friend may no longer move me now, or not move me as much. But it's important that I remember that friend, and her death—and if I just forgot all about her, perhaps even her name, that is a serious failure. This is, in part, why many people have a horror of being forgotten once gone (Margalit, 2002). As I wrote above, such cognitive states *are* valenced, since they either involve value judgments, or are formed, and maintained, because of judgments about value. Knowledge of the past, however precise and exhaustive, that is completely severed from any evaluation is not a fitting response and, in my view, of little value. And if, say, the last record of some historical atrocity could be preserved only in order to serve as sadistic entertainment, then I think it would be better if that record was lost.

Third, Valuism only makes a claim about the existence, and source of, a range of backward-looking reasons. The strength of these reasons compared to the many other reasons we recognize is a further question. As I develop Valuism here, it offers an account of reasons we *already* recognize—reasons reflected in a range of institutions, practices and attitudes. These are already demanding in the sense that they involve a cost, as we saw earlier, because they come at the expense of other things we can do or invest in. But this is a cost most of us *are* willing to bear. Valuism explains why we aren't wrong to do so.

A related objection is that my use of examples of past atrocities such as the Holocaust allows me to overstate the case for backward-looking moral reasons to care about the past. Such horrific instance of moral evil may indeed generate impartial reasons to look backwards. But much of the past—the terracotta figurines of the Nok culture or the etiquette of the Heian period—falls outside the moral domain and doesn't generate such reasons.<sup>6</sup>

I did largely focus on examples of events that involve great value or disvalue. These, however, also include major intellectual breakthroughs and cultural achievements—events whose value is not clearly moral but which, I believe, still generate impartial backward-looking reasons. Such past events involving immense value are ones where these backward-looking reasons seem to me to apply to all, or at least to many of us, and where they also call for something close enough to robust valuing.

Other historical events—including many that have a moral dimension—involve less value and thus generate weaker reasons. These reasons call for a largely cognitive response, and apply to us only as a collective rather than to each of us. And in some cases, responding to them may be only supererogatory. Even here, however, the normative pressure exerted by the past can potentially constrain our individual actions. I needn't know anything about Medieval rug weaving techniques. But it would be wrong for me to knowingly use our only evidence about them in some papier-mâché construction—thereby perhaps forever severing our link to a valuable aspect of the past.

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<sup>5</sup> This point has implications both for how we think about fitting attitudes to value and for questions about what kind of knowledge is worth knowing. For example, Hurka (2011) holds that the best knowledge is “the most organized or systematic knowledge, with general principles unifying and explaining derived particulars”—what matters is breadth and explanatory power, not any prior value inherent in the subject matter. This view has the implausible implication that scientific knowledge is far more important than historical knowledge: knowing about cosmology, chemistry and even biology is far more valuable than knowing about, e.g. the causes of WWI (Kraut, 2011). Some argue that some or even all historical events cannot be subsumed under law-like causal generalizations. If, for example, atrocities such as the Holocaust defy comprehension, as some hold, then knowledge about the Holocaust has only lowly value on Hurka's account. This seems to me wrong, and Valuism helps explain why.

<sup>6</sup> See Matthes (2015) for a similar view. However, Matthes is sceptical about a link between non-moral value and compelling reasons for everyone to engage with it, whereas the reasons claimed by Valuism rarely involve anything like a requirement to robustly value past events—and as we have just seen, neither must these reasons apply to each and every one of us.

And we can agree, finally, there are numerous past events that involve too little value to merit anyone's attention—think of a Phrygian's bad breakfast.

Suppose, though, that this last objection succeeds, and it is only events of moral significance that generate the relevant impartial backward-looking reasons. Since Gibbon only slightly exaggerated when he wrote that history is “little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortune of mankind”, Valuism would still justify, and potentially also explain, a great deal of our concern with the past. Moreover, to understand past moral evil we would need to know about, and understand, much else about the past. So this narrowing of the view would not significantly affect its implications.

## Conclusion

Samuel Scheffler writes that

“many people care intensely, though in ways that are rarely made explicit or articulate, about certain things that happened in the past ... Our attitudes toward the past... are complex, puzzling, and poorly understood.” (Scheffler, 2010)<sup>7</sup>

My aim here was to try to clarify one central strand of our concern about the past. The past contains a vast amount of value, and we should recognize, and fittingly respond, to that value. To be indifferent to history is to regard past people as if they don't matter, as if they had never existed. It's as if someone were screaming in the next room yet we went on as if nothing has happened, simply because it's impossible to access the room and help that person.

It is estimated that the number of people who have lived throughout history is around 107 billion; of these, only around 7 billion are currently alive. There is vastly more value behind us than around us. It is only right that we orient our lives in a way that at least minimally expresses recognition of this fact. That is justification enough for our occasional glances backward.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> I've excised his references to our attitudes to the future.

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